

Suction Dredging Permit Information

Montana Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (MPDES)

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality issues authorization letters that allow use of portable suction dredges under conditions of the Suction Dredge General Discharge Permit (GDP). Suction dredges with inside diameters of 4 inches or less can be authorized under the GDP. Operation of a larger suction dredge requires authorization under an individual MPDES discharge permit. To operate under the GDP, an authorization letter and a copy of the GDP must be onsite at all times. Dredges must not be used to cut into or undercut stream banks or used in any way that could cause bank caving, measurable erosion of banks, or loss of bank stabilizing vegetation. Chemical addition for enhancement of mineral recovery is prohibited.

After 30 minutes of operation, the permittee is required to observe water clarity upstream and downstream of the dredge. If water within 10 stream widths downstream of the dredge is noticeably more turbid or cloudy than water upstream of the dredge, the permittee must cease or reduce operations. Each GDP authorization letter specifies the increase in turbidity caused by dredging that will be allowed, based on Montana Surface Water Quality Standards [Administrative Rules of Montana 17.30.6]. In highest quality waters, classified as A-1, no increase is allowed; therefore, suction dredging is not allowed. For waters classified B-1 and C-1, the allowable turbidity increase is 5 nephelometric turbidity units (NTU); for other waters, the allowable increase is 10 NTU.

There must be no discharge that produces a visible oil or petroleum sheen in the receiving stream. Care must be taken to prevent spilled or leaking fuels or lubricants from entering waters. There must be no discharge of floating solids or visible foam in other than trace amounts.

Permit applications must identify specific waters to be worked so that fisheries biologists can determine what restrictions will be required to protect fisheries. Each authorization letter will specify the segment(s) of a stream, river, or lake where a dredge can be operated, and at what times. Seasonal restrictions, such as allowing dredging only from July 1 through August 31, are common. The Department may authorize amendments to the designated work area if the applicant requests it in writing.

An authorization letter permitting dredging under the portable suction dredge GDP does not eliminate a permittee's obligation to obtain other permits that may be required, depending on location. Local conservation districts issue 310 permits for suction dredging under the Montana Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act. Contact the conservation district with jurisdiction in the area where dredging is planned. A list of conservation district telephone numbers and addresses is available on the previous web page.

The Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) may require a water use permit for withdrawal from a stream; contact the DNRC Appropriations Program Manager at 406-444-6601. The Forest Service may require a permit and plan of operations for suction dredging on Forest Service land; contact the USFS Regional Minerals Office at 406-329-3565, or a Ranger District office. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) may require a permit for dredging on BLM lands; contact the BLM at 406-494-5059. The US Corps of Engineers may require a Section 10 permit for dredging in sections of the Missouri, Yellowstone, or Kootenai Rivers. The Corps may be contacted at 406-441-1375.

For more information on MPDES suction dredge permits, contact John Wadhams of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality at 406-444-2783 or jwadhams@mt.gov